In March 2025, Andrew Chen posted a Substack post: [DoorDash's v1 was 8 PDF menus on a static HTML website]. The basic premise, that testing an MVP without building or coding, is so fundamental that he does not even discuss that in detail, he goes on to a more nuanced discussion. Side note: not only was I at Stanford when DoorDash got started, I was actually in the small seminar at the business school where the four founders launched the company. I can tell you a few stories about it (not salacious).*

Now, you might say, particularly as a deep tech entrepreneur (including biotech and medical device), that it makes sense to do customer validation in this way on a product that is, at its core, not technical. But this is actually missguided. For example, Dropbox, which was a technically challenging product, famously launched with just a demo video - and the video still accurately described the experience of using Dropbox even today.. Drew Huston started building only after he uploaded the video to Youtube and validated customer interest with a simple metric - tens of thousands of email signups.

Over time I have come to realize over time, after seeing this mistake countless times, that deep tech entrepreneurs are particularly susceptible to this notion. The reason for this, at its root, is emotionally driven - discomfort and fear, not some rational miscalculation. This approach allows an engineer to stay in her or his comfort zone by engineering for years rather than speaking to customers. It even allows them to fantasize about success without rude interruption by the real world of customers and markets. There is also the bias by those that come from a science research background that R&D should be open ended, and thus not guided by trivialities such as actual customer feedback - [Henry Ford probably never said "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses"].. But this is only true of fundamental, paradigm-shifting technology. People like to cite canonical examples such as the airplane or the laser, which were driven by technical curiosity before considering markets. But even with such fundamental technical breakthroughs, this is the exception rather than the rule. There are many more examples of inventions that their owners thought were going to be the next airplane or laser, but that in the end nobody wanted to buy.

It may seem somewhat mysterious or even nonsensical to the deep tech founder as to how to do customer validation without a technically-refined product or at least prototype MVP. The answer is actually straightforward in concept. The execution will take time and patience, but this certainly will be faster and cheaper than doing tech development first, much less dealing with regulatory hurdles such as FDA approval. Think about it this way, do you think established medical device or biotech companies invest millions or billions of dollars into developing a product that they won't be able to sell? Certainly not –in those cases, they would have validated the markets, and yes they do fail for technical/scientific/regulatory reasons, but outside observers make the mistake of thinking that they did not validate product-market fit **first**.

To put it simply, one must acquire **meaningful** customer feedback as Dropbox did, before investing in expensive R&D. Of course the devil is in the details of the term **meaningful.** Let us imagine that you have an idea for a new medical device that you want to validate no-code. What you need to do is to identify and develop relationships with legitimate decision makers and buyers in the field, who (1) will take the time and energy to truly evaluate what you are working on, and (2) give you an honest and meaningful yes in terms of buying. The first is not easy and can take months or years, but again, this is better than building something that no one wants. The second part is even more challenging and requires a certain kind of honest dialogue, plus social and perceptual nuance that sometimes escapes techie founders. But if you don't (2) yields a clear no, at least you can stop there, and save yourself millions of dollars and years of headaches

The "yes" I am talking about is in essence "yes, if you built this exact thing you describe: we would buy it". And this is the same MVP customer validation illustrated above with DoorDash and Dropbox. Some founders make the mistake of thinking that a friendly "sounds promising" or "great, keep me updated on your progress" counts as customer validation. This is the false promise that causes countless techie founders to waste years of their lives.

Ideally you would get an LOI, although this may not be practical, because the actual sale will be too far in the future. But you should be seeking a signal strong enough that it is similar to an LOI. A useful litmus test is that a third-party would take it as essentially the equivalent of an LOI - would a third-party, such as a potential investor or partner, view the signal as strong enough that product-market fit has been achieved? Contrast a weak or false signal that might motivate an emotionally-invested naive founder to charge ahead.

Such founders think that once they build an insanely great product, that they won't need to do this step, that customers will just say "take my money". Nothing could be further from the truth. You still still will have to do this step, and can be as difficult, if not more difficult, than the technical work. So don't do things in the wrong order - validate and then build, not the other way around.

Note that while consumer and enterprise are different domains, the product-market-fit concept applies equally to both, particularly if we amend it to product-market-channel-fit, where the channel in consumer is essentially marketing pipeline and in enterprise it is essentially the long, complex process of selling to a large, complex organization.

*DD anecdote

I wrote this snippet for another piece and I think it is relevant here:

Fundraising Roadmap

One way of grounding your financing milestones (the only way, to be realistic) is to tie them to product milestones. Take the below with a grain of salt, they are all terms of art, but they illustrate a general pattern and point I want to make. What most startups hope for is something like this:

Bootstrap for **Ideation → MVP** resulting in Pre-Seed

Use Pre-Seed for **MVP** → **Product** resulting in Series A
Series A - **Product** → **Product-market fit** → Series B
Series B - **Product-market fit** → **Product-market-channel fit** → Series C
Series C - **Product-market-channel fit** → **Growth** → Series D
Series D+ - **Growth to Exit -** IPO or M&A

Some founders cannot raise pre-seed after product or even product-market fit, and such this can be viewed as a critical path, rate-limiting problem. A founder with a lot of social capital can push the initial fundraising roadmap half-a-step or a whole step early, the latter meaning that they can raise pre-seed to do **Ideation** → **MVP**, which makes life a lot easier (one might even be able to take a small salary). Getting into an accelerator sort of counts as that whole step early, although there is often a trade-off re: valuation crushing.